New York Theatre Critics' Reviews *1955*

Volume XVI, Number 7 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of March 7, 1955

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NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"Bus Stop"

Daily Mirror

March 3, 1955

'Bus Stop,' Loaded With Laughs, a Sure Hit

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Robert Whitehead and Roger L. Stevens installed "Bus Stop" in the Music Box Wednesday evening, and it should prove a popular terminal for playgoers for months to come. William Inge has penned an endearing, though deceptively simple, comedy. Nothing of importance seems to be happening for most of the three acts.

YET, AS THE final curtain falls, you realize that lives have been changed, some rather shabby people have been regenerated, at least for the, nonce. And it's all done with magical warmth and humor. There's nothing arty or pretentious about it. It's just human and amusing.

A Kansas snowstorm brings an inter-state bus to a halt in a small town, while crews clear blocked roads. Into a diner, which also serves as a bus stop, stagger a cheap night-club singer, who is being shanghaied by a naive rodeo rider to his Montana ranch; the cowhand who has been something of a father to the rodeo rider; a learned and inebriated professor and the driver himself.

With the local sheriff, a rural philosopher, serving as Greek chorus, troubles are brought to the surface and ironed out. The nightclub canary discovers that the rip-roaring kid who wants to marry her can be gentle. His exuberance comes from shyness. With these two set for domesticity in Montana, the buddy realizes he isn't needed any more and decides to strike out on his own.

THE BROKEN-DOWN doctor of philosophy, with three ex-wives and a fondness for young girls, plays the balcony scene from "Romeo and Juliet" with a highschool teen-ager waiting on the counter, and finds himself a more decent fellow for it. The mistress of the inn has a fling with the bus driver, and doesn't regret it.

As Inge points out, it's all like Chaucer's Canterbury Tales in a modern setting. It's like Boccacio's "Decameron," too. It's told in salty and tender present-day speech. And it's ever so delightful.

In a just-right setting by Boris Aronson, Harold Clurman uses a perfect cast to excellent advantage. Kim Stanley is nothing less than wonderful as the brassy chantoosie with a heart of gold. Albert Salmi is completely winning as the direct-action rancher who knows what he wants but has to learn, the hard way, how to get it.

• • •

ANTHONY ROSS, a really fine and versatile actor, contributes one of his best performances as the shaky intellectual with disdain for the phony and affection for the true. Elaine Stritch, who knows how to walk away with a scene, romps off with several, as owner of the eating joint. A real trouper, this gal.

Lou Polan etches the sheriff, who has learned much from his own youthful mistakes, with sympathy and insight. Phyllis Love, Patrick McVey and Crahan Denton are outstanding in other roles.

As for "Bus Stop," you'd better stop by the Music Box immediately, and make your reservations for it. It has heart, compassion, wisdom and loads of laughs. It has those qualities that made Inge's "Come Back, Little Sheba" and "Picnic" so memorable. It's Broadway's newest hit!

"BUS STOP"

Play by William Inge; staged by Harold Clurman; setting by Boris Aronson; costumes and lighting by Paul Morrison; presented by Robert Whitehead and Roger L. Stevens at the Music Box Theatre, March 2, 1955. The cast:

Elma Duckworth... Phyllis Love
Grace..... Elaine Stritch
Will Masters..... Lou Polan
Cherie..... Kim Stanley
Dr. Gerard Lyman.. Anthony Ross
Carl..... Patrick McVey
Virgil Blessing.. Crahan Denton
Bo Decker..... Albert Salmi

NEW YORK **Herald Tribune**

March 3, 1955

THEATER

'Bus Stop'

By WALTER F. KERR

EARLIER this season Miss Kim Stanley was made a star and, for the first time, saw her name go up in lights over a theater. For her new play, William Inge's "Bus Stop," she modestly suggested that she be billed along with the other actors beneath the title.

The trouble with that girl is that she can't see herself. When she walks on the stage, the set changes color. When she fumbles in her bag for a lipstick, all life around her seems to stop and stare until the momentous search is completed. When she drawls out a simple "Well, really!" in her long, low, and magnificently adenoidal tones, the English language acquires more comic and pathetic overtones than you had ever noticed before. Miss Stanley can bill herself any way she likes. She is the real thing, and word is going to get around.

• • •

The further good news is that this fumbling, frowning, gloriously incandescent actress has finally found a play as winning as she is. Mr. Inge has not set out to write an epic, just a warm and sensible little overnight scrap between a couple of stranded, stubborn, appealing people.

A bus out of Kansas City pulls up at a cheerful roadside diner in the middle of a howling snowstorm. (Designer Boris Aronson has made the snow lift and swirl with a fine abandon through the joint's expansive plate-glass windows.) All roads are blocked, and four or five weary travelers are going to have to hole up until morning.

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Miss Stanley, scurrying through the doorway in a spangled night-club gown and a seedy fur-trimmed jacket, is the passenger with most to worry about. She's been pursued, made love to, and finally kidnapped by a 21-year-old cowboy with a ranch of his own and the romantic methods of a unusually headstrong bull.

The belligerent cowhand is right behind her, ready to sling her over his shoulder and carry her, alive and kicking, all the way to Montana. Even as she's ducking out from under his clumsy but confident embraces, and screeching at him fiercely to shut him up, she pauses to furrow her forehead and muse "Someplace deep inside me I got a funny feeling I'm gonna end up in Montana." (I might mention in passing that Miss Stanley gets not only laughter, but solid applause, with this line; it just goes to show what I mean).

• • •

Mr. Inge is not trying to mislead us, and there isn't a soul out front who doesn't share Miss Stanley's conviction about her destiny. The fascination of the funny and very touching evening lies not in its surprises but in its sharp, honest, down-to-earth eye for character. Miss Stanley introduces herself as a singer named Cherie, with a wow of an accent on the second syllable. Albert Salmi, as the thick-headed but yearning abductor, promptly mispronounces it. The fat is in the fire and these two beautifully-matched but cantankerous knuckleheads proceed to swap insults, blows, and nervous confessions for two-and-a-half enchanting hours.

Let it be said that Mr. Salmi is no faltering second to the unbilled star. As he reels in bewilderment from a woman who doesn't seem to want him, snarls despondently over a lonely cup of coffee, or turns in despair to a friend who can explain to him the courtesies of wooing, he is just dandy. Sullenness isn't normally an appealing characteristic in a leading man; Mr. Salmi makes it seem as though it were a virtue to be prized, and nourished.

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Under Harold Clurman's canny and deeply sympathetic direction, every one else in the company shines, too. Elaine Stritch positively glows as a small-time hostess with anything but innocent eyes. Anthony Ross, tackling the play's least necessary role, makes a lightly tragic figure out of his garrulous, hounded, poetry-spouting drunk. Phyllis Love is fetching as a scholarly waitress who is delighted to have even a faint fling with a traveling man; Lou Polan is excellent as a kindly but two-fisted sheriff, and Crahan Denton and Patrick McVey round out the gathering handsomely.

"Bus Stop" is certainly the best play we've had all season.

New York Post

March 3, 1955

By Richard Watts Jr.

William Inge Achieves It Again

William Inge should be a great comfort to all of us. In a day when there is reason to worry about the state of American playwriting, he brings to the theater a kind of warm-hearted compassion, creative vigor, freshness of approach and appreciation of average humanity that can be wonderfully touching and stimulating. In his newest work, "Bus Stop," which opened last night at the Music Box, he has written a romantic comedy about ordinary people that is at once humorous, simple, steadily entertaining and vastly endearing. It is also splendidly acted.

For his new play, he has taken an entirely familiar formula, and hasn't bothered to give it any new or unexpected twists. Indeed, plot is clearly the least of his concerns. He has merely thrown together an assorted collection of travelers, passengers on a bus temporarily stranded by a snowstorm in a small-town restaurant some miles west of Kansas City, and watched them as they wait for their journey to resume. I can't promise that you will be surprised by what happens to them or how they pair off, but I think you'll be pulling for all of them.

The Quality

As one who admired and enjoyed "Bus Stop" continuously, I'll concede a few things about it immediately. It doesn't attempt to go as deeply into character as its author has done in either of his previous plays. It frankly lacks the poignant dramatic sturdiness and the tragic implications that were present in "Come Back, Little Sheba" and "Picnic." It is unashamedly sentimental in its viewpoint. And I suppose it was written chiefly for entertainment, if you regard that as bad. But it is likewise set down with all of Mr. Inge's skill and warmth.

Even though he is not here concerned with probing deeply into the recesses of the tortured human soul, Mr. Inge's compassion, his appreciation of the loneliness and the inner decency of seemingly commonplace mankind, and his ability to invest the most ordinary people with a sort of unostentatious fineness of spirit are present to give his play a quality of modest gallantry. There is rich humor in it and a true theatrical sense that make "Bus Stop" enormously entertaining without cheapness. And it reveals its author's gift for true but vivid dialogue admirably.

The People

Basically, Mr. Inge's concern is the true dramatist's interest in character. I suppose they might seem fairly stock figures, the girl from the cheap nightclub, the rambunctious cowboy, the quiet cowboy, the honest sheriff, the drunken teacher, the amorous woman restaurant-owner, the lusty bus driver and the innocent young waitress. But because the author sees into them compassionately and appreciates their worth as human beings, they take on reality, dignity and importance. What happens to them thereupon becomes a matter of absorbing interest.

All of the acting is close to perfection, and Harold Clurman's direction is enormously helpful. So is Boris Aronson's atmospheric set. Kim Stanley as the nightclub girl and Albert Salmi as the noisy cowboy with the gentle heart have the most important roles, and they play them superbly. But Anthony Ross as the alcoholic, Lou Polan as the sheriff, Elaine Stritch as the restaurant owner, Phyllis Love as the waitress, Crahan Denton as the sad cowhand, and Patrick McVey as the bus driver are equally fine in their smaller parts. "Bus Stop" is a moving and delightful play.

Journal-American

March 3, 1955

Inge Comedy Hits High Spot

Kim Stanley and Albert Salmi Shine in Hilarious Triumph

By JOHN McCLAIN

THE team of William Inge, playwright, and Kim Stanley, actress, proved to be a prize-winning combination with "Picnic" a couple of seasons ago. Last night they repeated their original triumph with "Bus Stop," which opened at The Music Box, but in this instance they have added a third high-scoring member to the backfield—Albert Salmi.

It is no headline that Mr. Inge can write the kind of mid-Western comedy and pathos that suits the extraordinary talents of Miss Stanley, but now he has found a young man who can take charge, stand up to her nasal twang, syllable for syllable, and provide us with an endearing love story. This is indeed a delightful amalgamation.

For his setting Mr. Inge might be accused to taking several pages from the "The Petrified Forest," or any similar effort in which a divergent group of people find themselves suddenly thrown together.

Snowbound

In "Bus Stop" it is a beanery in a small town thirty miles west of Kansas City; the road ahead is snowed-in, the phones are down, and there's nothing for the bus driver and his customers to do but sweat it out until morning.

In this case the characters are, principally, a singer from a Kansas City clip joint and the tough-talking, soft-hearted cowboy who is hi-jacking her back to his ranch in Oklahoma to become his bride. The bus stop provides the time lag to give her the protection of an understanding sheriff, to bring the rancher to his senses, and to regenerate the romance in the closing chukker.

Subordinate moments of hilarity and heart-throb are provided by the mistress of the cafe where they're all marooned. She consummates a love affair with the bus driver for which the schedule has never before allowed ample time.

Then there is a drunken college professor, harboring an ignoble secret, who finds a brief moment of grandeur and self-appraisement with the youngster who waits table in the joint. And the cowboy's pal, a strange monastic figure, who strums his guitar and breathes primitive philosophy into the ear of his belligerent friends.

But mostly it is Miss Stanley and Mr. Salmi all the way. There is never the slightest doubt of the play's outcome, from the second the curtain rolls up, but thanks to the magic of Mr. Inge and his compatriots it makes a merry evening. One doesn't even mind, particularly if the whole thing stops dead in the middle of the second act for an amateur theatrical performance.

In fairness it must also be recorded that the principals would not fare so well without stand-out performances from Elaine Stritch, as the proprietress of "Grace's Cafe"; Phyllis Love, as the adolescent waitress; Anthony Ross, as the professor; Patrick McVey, as the bus driver, and Crahan Denton, as the cow-poke's chum.

Not forgetting for a minute the contribution of Boris Aronson, who devised a dreary and desolate tavern interior with a full-scale snowstorm raging outside the plate glass window; or the capable and comprehensive efforts of Harold Clurman, who directed.

I thought they held the final curtain a few beats too long; the show is over when Miss Stanley leaves the premises. But it isn't going to make much difference—"Bus Stop" will be with us as long as the road to The Music Box is open.

The New York Times

March 3, 1955

Theatre: 'Bus Stop'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

HAVING written a wonderful play two years ago, William Inge has now written a better. He calls it "Bus Stop." It was beautifully acted at the Music Box last evening.

To say that it records a cowboy's stormy courtship of a night club singer is to report nothing significant about the play. For "Bus Stop" is a series of character portraits of some travelers shut up in a tawdry restaurant during a snowstorm. Out of a rather ordinary situation Mr. Inge has put together an uproarious comedy that never strays from the truth. Once it gets started it flows naturally and sympathetically through the hearts and hopes of some admirable people.

•

As a group they are common folks who don't know much except the basic principles of living. The cowboy is a blustering braggart who thinks a girl has to be lassoed into marriage. The night club singer is a vulgar girl who does not like to be bullied. In the course of the evening the cowboy learns that tenderness is more effective than bravado, and the night club singer learns that an honest boy is more lovable than a stage-door Johnny. Their courtship is riotous, violent, wild and hilarious, but in the end things turn out very well.

But Mr. Inge is no man to shackle a play with a plot. As in "Picnic," he is interested in the ordinary waywardness of simple people going about their personal affairs. There are the bus driver and the proprietress of the restaurant—a pair that gets to the main issue with a minimum of delay. There is a romantic high school girl who stands on tiptoe before life with some bookish dreams in her head.

•

There is a drunken professor with a sardonic mind and very loose habits who finds himself shamed into behaving like a gentleman. There is an amiable, level-headed sheriff. There is a modest, fatherly cowhand with a guitar and some notes of wisdom about human behavior.

Best of all, there is some moving conversation about the nature of love and the generosity that makes it possible. For Mr. Inge has more than an evening's entertainment in mind. He has ideas and principles. While his comedy is roaring around the stage, he says a number of simple truths that give height and depth to his writing, and that bring into his play an artistic and intellectual maturity that was less conspicuous in "Picnic" or "Come Back, Little Sheba."

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The performance is glorious. Harold Clurman's direction is both sensitive and high-spirited, and it has penetrated into every corner of the script. Boris Aronson, who has not designed a setting since night before last, has executed a vivid portrait of a slatternly diner, the wintry outdoors crowding close around the warm interior.

As the night club singer, Kim Stanley is superb. Still the traveling lady, she gives a glowing performance that is full of amusing detail—cheap, ignorant, bewildered, but also radiant with personality. Albert Salmi's hulking cowboy who alternates between screaming high spirits and naive despondency is both funny and touching. As in the case of Miss Stanley, Mr. Salmi's comic acting has plenty of human truth inside.

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In the part of the tipsy professor, Anthony Ross gives his richest performance—sardonically witty, pathetically self-critical, always fluent in the stream of expression. Elaine Stritch's loose-jointed, tough-talking restaurant keeper is vastly amusing. And Phyllis Love's schoolgirl is innocently beautiful with quick sympathies and considerable strength of character.

There is a fond and conscientious sheriff by Lou Polan, whose homely manners are thoroughly winning. Crahan Denton plays a guitar-strumming cowboy with an unaffected gleam of humanity. Patrick McVey is the bustling, businesslike bus-driver who does not waste time on tedious formalities.

So Mr. Inge's comedy, in both the writing and the acting, is a memorable achievement. The story is uproarious. But Mr. Inge has taken a long look into the hearts of his people. Being completely human, they are the salt of the earth.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

March 3, 1955

'Bus Stop'—All Out for Laughs

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"Bus Stop" has just the same irresistible glow about it that makes a fire magnetic to people coming in out of the cold.

And they come in out of the cold often in the winning comedy at the Music Box. William Inge has employed the blizzard gimmick to shut off a jitney load of travelers from their usual little worlds.

This favorite device in melodramatic fiction is used by Mr. Inge to provide focus for a thoroughly affectionate comedy.

He writes a clambake for actors. It is immaculately cast, with every single participant scoring high under the Clurman direction.

Snowbound in Diner.

Eight characters are snowbound in the roadside diner. Each one departs with a night to remember. The tawdry little singer finds the kind of love she thought did not exist. The roaring cowboy who chases her discovers the acquisitive powers of humility.

The romantic and drink-befuddled professor realizes that love is for the brave, and foregoes a likely conquest. The proprietress of the eatery launches a happy arrangement with the bus driver, one that suits them both. Her young assistant glows with the charge of finding that someone can love her.

The sheriff proves once more that his wisdom and shrewd fistic aim can be invincible. And the cowboy's lifelong pal faces the well-known fact that three's a crowd.

The light of attention returns consistently to Kim Stanley as the little singer who remains childish despite a tough life. Miss Stanley has splendid control over her role.

A Cowboy Learns.

Albert Salmi once more shows himself an assertive, knowing talent in the theater, as the cowboy. On his first big city binge, he is ruthless as an avalanche, howling his likes and dislikes, and physically pushing the world around to his bidding.

Before the night is over, he is amazed to find that gentleness is neither cowardly nor shameful.

Elaine Stritch plays the restaurant owner, with control and repose that is a fine advance in her acting.

Anthony Ross has the part of the alcoholic Ph.D. and draws a fine balance between its tragedy and joviality. As the object of his momentary attentions, Phyllis Love is gentle and fine.

The other roles in the excellent cast are played by Lou Polan as a smart sheriff, Patrick McVey as an opportunistic bus driver, and Crahan Denton as the cowboy's buddy.

"Bus Stop" is hard-cored and hilarious about what it has to say.

DAILY NEWS

March 3, 1955

New Inge Comedy, 'Bus Stop,' Well Acted, but It's Sketchily Written

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Every so often an intelligent dramatist turns out a scenario instead of a play. When this happens, the scenario usually is a cross-section job—a situation in which various kinds of people are thrown together by some kind of emergency, and in which they must stay together until the dramatist and the audience get through examining. Such a scenario is William Inge's "Bus Stop," which was presented last evening at the Music Box Theatre.

Often this cross-section gimmick works very well, as in "The Admirable Crichton," in which various types found themselves shipwrecked, and is in "The Petrified Forest," in which sundry types were thrown together by a mobster. At other times the trick doesn't work so well, as in Maxwell Anderson's "Truckline Cafe." I'd say that "Bus Stop" falls somewhere between "Crichton" and "Truckline." It is well written, so far as dialog and a feeling for character go, and it is very well acted; but it is a scenario and not a play.

They Are Snowbound

Playwright Inge chooses to throw his characters together in a restaurant in a small town just a bit west of Kansas City. They are stuck here because their westbound bus has got stuck in a snowstorm. The passengers include a night club cutie from Kansas City, a highly educated drunkard and two Montana cowboys on their way home to the ranch. The younger of the cowpokes, in his first adventure in sex, has practically abducted the cutie up to this point.

These travelers, of course, encounter the local folks. They meet the proprietress of the restaurant, who is hard-boiled, and her niece, who is a starry-eyed, innocent highschooler. And they meet the sheriff, who is a very kindly codger packing a gun and two hard fists.

Very Good Acting

Somehow, everything about "Bus Stop" strikes me as make-believe, and not very exciting at that. But I do admire the acting by Kim Stanley and Albert Salmi of playwright Inge's two principal specimens—the night club cutie and the practically virgin cowboy. Miss Stanley is full of innocent little actressy tricks, all beautifully timed—and one of these seasons young Salmi is going to get a part that will measure up to his ability.

I also admire the play-acting of Anthony Ross as the drunken intellectual, Elaine Stritch as the restaurant proprietress, Phyllis Love as the small-town teenager, Lou Polan as the sheriff and Crahan Denton as another cowboy who has brought his guitar. Boris Aronson's snow-covered hash house also is very good.

But last evening I just couldn't get myself to care very much about the romance between the young cowboy and the slightly soiled lady. I just didn't believe in it—and if one doesn't believe in something it is a scenario and not a play.

"The Master Builder"

New York Post

March 2, 1955

By Richard Watts Jr.

Revival of 'The Master Builder'

"The Master Builder" is one of Ibsen's most difficult plays; not that it is difficult to understand, but that its cold detachment and shadowy texture are extremely hard to bring to stimulating dramatic life. Although Oscar Homolka and Joan Tetzel act it intelligently and well in Max Faber's adaptation of the drama, which opened last night at the Phoenix Theater, the strangely impersonal abstraction of the great Norwegian's symbolic musings clings to it and keeps the work from communicating more than a kind of coolly detached intellectual interest.

This is certainly not to deny that Halvard Solness, the builder of homes and churches, the constructor of tall steeples who had a deadly fear of heights, is one of Ibsen's notable creations. A man of stature, mind and driving force, he is an arresting combination of dreamer and realist, of idealism and selfishness, genius and folly. It is one of the author's achievements in the play that you can accept him as a person of size, and it is one of Mr. Homolka's accomplishments as an actor that he enables you to believe in the qualities of Solness.

That the master builder is also shown as a man whose life has come to an end before the play has begun should not be the reason for the odd coldness of the drama. Ibsen had an especial talent for creating living dead men, and, although I believe I am in a minority in the opinion, I have always felt that "John Gabriel Borkman," which deals with a similar figure, is one of his finest works. But the dead spirit of Halvard Solness, possibly because it is such a powerful creation, dominates the mood of "The Master Builder" perhaps only too well.

Since the play is not one of its author's most familiar dramas, it may be advisable to remind you that its central character is so fearful of youth that he sees it as an enemy waiting to crush him and treats his young assistant and an adoring girl who works in his office with a selfish cruelty based on his terrors. But it is youth that wrecks him, youth in the person of another girl, who had worshipped him since she was a child but unwittingly sends him to his death by refusing to believe in the reality of his fear of heights.

Ibsen, as everybody knows, was a great fellow for symbolism, and "The Master Builder" is unquestionably filled with symbols of one kind or another. My perhaps misguided conviction is that they aren't particularly difficult to follow, if you set your mind to it. But they do have the effect, it seems to me, of making the people of the play appear more abstractions than human beings, thus adding a serious handicap to it as living drama. One result is that the interest always remains on the most detached and unemotional of planes.

I thought Miss Tetzel wisely refrained from making the girl who destroys Solness seem heavily concerned with symbolic significance and gave her, instead, youth, freshness, eagerness and vitality. As the builder's wife, whose life had been destroyed by her husband's driving ambition, Margaret Barker is entirely believable, while Muriel Berkson, Art Smith and Gene Saks were as they should have been as the other victims of his ego. "The Master Builder" may represent Ibsen, as Shaw thought, at one of his intellectual peaks, but it remains cold and emotionless.

"THE MASTER BUILDER"

Revival of the play by Henrik Ibsen, adapted by Max Faber; staged by Oscar Homolka, with assistance by Ira Cirker; scenery by Boris Aronson; costumes by Alvin Colt; lighting by Lester Polakov; presented by T. Edward Hambleton and Norris Houghton at the Phoenix Theatre, March 1, 1955. The cast:

Kala Fosil.....Muriel Berkson
Knut Brovik.....Art Smith
Ragnar Brovik.....Gene Saks
Halvard Solness..Oscar Homolka
Aline Solness...Margaret Barker
Dr. Herdal.....Joseph Foley
Hilda Wangel.....Joan Tetzel

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

March 2, 1955

Ibsen Played With Simple Taste

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"The Master Builder" is one of Ibsen's plays which makes you wish for those printed subtitles that clarify foreign language movies.

This revival at the Phoenix is directed by its star, Oscar Homolka. He has been wise enough to know that it will not stand any awesome treatment. Neither will it bear being jazzed up.

The play has to be simply and leisurely spoken, because there is so much information to be passed on to the audience. Much of the drama is consumed by long dialogs. If one listens carefully, the accumulation of fact and fancy is startling.

The man described in the title has never studied architecture. He became a prominent builder after his wife's home burned.

A young girl comes seeking the builder. Ten years before, when she was a child, he made love to her and promised to come for her on this day.

In an ecstasy of demanding that he be the romantic figure she hoped to find, she urges him to climb a tower and hang a wreath on the peak of his new building.

If he does, he believes, he will at last conquer the fear that has made him deliberately crush his younger associates. His wife tries futilely to stop him.

The young girl cheers him wildly, as she had years before. He falls to his death. The girl who a moment before has apparently adored him is greedily content with her victory. So the youth he feared destroys him.

Endless symbolism and reference to the conquering weaknesses do not prevent the play from being morbid and cynical. It is static for the most part. Here Boris Aronson's striking unit sets are vastly helpful, with their massive sense of dominating structure.

Mr. Homolka enacts the role of the builder with deceptive casualness.

Lesser Dreamer.

Joan Tetzel plays the young admirer. Her underlining of coquettishness makes this girl a less heroic dreamer than she should be.

Margaret Barker is the builder's morbid wife. She has lost her twin sons in the fire that destroyed their home. Even after 13 years, she is determined to wallow in her tragedy. Miss Barker makes the woman border ethereally on derangement without indulging in melodramatics.

Art Smith is canny and telling as the old architect whom the builder has destroyed. Muriel Berkson and Gene Saks are effective as the young people whom he clings to only to destroy.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

March 2, 1955

THEATER

'The Master Builder'

By WALTER F. KERR

If I remember correctly, it was in Moss Hart's "Light Up the Sky" that one of the Broadway show-folk paused to remark that "the best way to get even with a producer is to talk him into a revival of Ibsen."

I'm afraid that there is nothing in the Phoenix Theater's new mounting of "The Master Builder" to challenge Mr. Hart's insight, foresight and general acumen.

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The management of the Phoenix has invited the new husband-wife acting team of Oscar Homolka and Joan Tetzel to plunge into the exceptionally difficult roles of Solness, the imposing architect who is terrified of the younger generation and yet irresistibly drawn to it, and Hilda Wangel, that ferocious youngster who drives him "to the impossible" and to his death.

But Mr. and Mrs. Homolka do not really plunge. They sit the drama out on the sidelines, conversing in light, low tones, shuffling softly from sofa to drawing-board, eternally suggesting that they have not yet got past those quiet early rehearsals in the living-room.

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The performances do not lack intelligence. Scarcely a groping word comes out of Mr. Homolka that is not sensibly imbedded in the guilty past of Solness, or in the thoughtful diagram that Ibsen was trying to draw. But scarcely a word comes out of him—really out of him, out where the customers might hear it and catch hold of its dramatic urgency.

When, on occasion, the actor succeeds in persuading the audience to join him in his reverent hush, we may get a moment of simple honesty. One such moment occurs as Mr. Homolka fixes his gaze on the challenging Hilda and tells her—in plain-spoken detail—of the fire that has destroyed his children but furthered his career. It is not possible, though, to sustain an entire evening, much less give it dramatic size and shape, at this casual and deflated pitch. Most of the time we simply watch this Solness beetle his brows, finger his enormous watch-chain, puff his stogie, and perplexedly tap at his forehead—without ever remembering what once may have been vigorous or vital about the role.

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Miss Tetzel is pretty, and it helps. She brings a somewhat livelier vocal tone into the room with her, too, as she first strides on in a green knitted cap, a knapsack slung over her shoulder. But this Hilda is no real hiker. The moment her walking things are disposed of, she is perching prettily on the furniture, tossing her long blonde hair over her shoulder, peeping at the master out of the corners of her sly eyes, and letting her mouth stay half open for minutes at a time to suggest—I guess—a kind of fey daintiness. She is not so much Ibsen's "wild bird of the wood, a bird of prey" as she is a moonstruck starling from the cages of Sir James M. Barrie.

Under the circumstances, the desperate tug-of-war between youth and age, between compromise and integrity, between idealism and venality, disappears. The play becomes a series of chatty, mildly informative duologues between people with time on their hands and nothing very important on their minds.

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Margaret Barker, as the dazed and sorrowing wife of the errant builder, breaks through the prevailing stillness at least once: in a sudden, sharply disturbing outburst of grief over the girlhood dolls that have perished along with her children. The balance of the company—including Art Smith, Muriel Berkson and Gene Saks—clings to the solemn and murky mood established by the principals.

Far and away the most arresting contribution to the evening is Boris Aronson's. The designer has planned a unit setting—an office interior that breaks open into a Norwegian drawing-room and then expands further to embrace some elaborate scaffolding and a striking tree-studded backdrop—with point and substance in its every angular line. Unfortunately, the performance that shuttles about inside it is only a wraith.

DAILY NEWS

March 2, 1955

'Master Builder,' at the Phoenix, Is Real Theatre at Its Very Best

By JOHN CHAPMAN

The Phoenix Theatre's finest production so far this season is Henrik Ibsen's "The Master Builder," which was given its first performance last evening. It was a splendid performance throughout, thanks not only to Oscar Homolka's playing of the title role but also to Homolka's direction of an intelligent and gifted company. Here, it seemed to me, was theatre as it should be but seldom is—a sound and holding drama, soundly acted.

"The Master Builder" is not rated as one of Ibsen's great works, perhaps, but surely it is a most human play, and Max Faber's adaptation has great clarity and artful simplicity. I don't believe it has been seen around here since the old days of the Civic Repertory, when Eva Le Gallienne was playing Hilda Wangel and Egon Brecher was the master builder—so it is a good thing for all of us who like to go to the theatre to have it back again.

Youth Has Its Way

This builder is a successful man who should really be calling himself an architect, but he is afraid of such a newfangled term. He is, indeed, afraid of anything new, and most fearful of youth itself—for in his heart he knows that if he gives it a chance, youth will push him aside. Which is just what happens. Youth, in the person of a headstrong, imaginative girl who has come into his life, causes him to fall from the scaffolding around the tower of the new home he has built for himself. At her urging, he has climbed this tower and hung from its peak the traditional garland of flowers to signify the completion of the work.

My recollection of other performances I have seen of this Ibsen work is that the master builder was a hard, ruthless man. Homolka plays him as though he were anything but this; he is gentle and humorous, and rather ashamed of himself for being afraid of the future. It is an admirable conception and an admirable performance.

And Homolka, as director, has persuaded everybody to go along with him in the same quiet but dramatically effective key. The company at the Phoenix acts like a company of actors all working toward one goal—the presentation of a play by Ibsen. It is not easy to get actors to do this, and only the best directors can manage the trick.

For Hilda Wangel, Homolka has his own wife, Joan Tetzel, giving a glowing performance of a strange and eager young girl. And, for his wife in the play itself—a woman who has been touched and hurt by tragedy—he has Margaret Barker. One of the most moving scenes in the theatre is Miss Barker's little moment when she mourns the loss of nine dolls in a fire that happened many years ago.

There is other sound support from Muriel Berkson, Art Smith, Gene Saks and Joseph Foley. Boris Aronson's settings, of an architect's office, a sitting room and a veranda, are beautiful in their simplicity and dramatic effectiveness. After muddling around all season long, the Phoenix has finally come back to theatre.

Journal American

March 2, 1955

Good Ibsen Adaptation

Phoenix Theatre Offers Fine Cast and Direction

By JOHN McCLAIN

IN GIVING us a new adaptation of Ibsen's "The Master Builder," it seems to me the Phoenix Theatre people are carefully fulfilling their mission. This is rather obscure Ibsen, to begin with, and will not often be chosen for revival uptown.

But in the production which they offered at their 2d ave. theatre last night they presented a top flight cast in brilliant settings, with the further vestment of skilled direction.

According to their own concepts, the Phoenix set out to bring to theatre-goers of modest means original and established plays which, because of mounting costs, would not appear to be feasible risks on Broadway. "The Master Builder" is an excellent case in point.

Provocative Play

I don't think it is a popular play and I seriously doubt that it would have any success in the rarified atmosphere beyond 40th st. But it is a provocative evening in anybody's theatre and, as such, deserves the patronage of serious drama fans.

Arriving at the particular matter of what the play is all about, however, I find myself somewhat stymied. It is apparent that Oscar Homolka is the "Master Builder," an architect of importance, and that he is mentally disturbed. He resents the normal intrusion of youth, the threat to the dynasty he has erected around himself.

Then comes Joan Tetzel, young and beguiling, and the best guess I can make as to what she represents is "Fate."

That's a cheap way to get out of this situation, and I'm sure there are many more profound explanations, but at least mine will work: she's the kid who gets him to relinquish some of his contracts to an assistant, and eventually induces him to overextend himself to his doom.

This involved symbolism is a thorn in the side of the reviewer, who should know exactly what he's talking about, but for the avid customer it should be great fun.

Perhaps Homolka, the Master Builder, is the personification of all avaricious nations and Miss Tetzel is Divine Justice; many wives will see Homolka as their husbands and Miss Tetzel as Father Time. This can go on far into the night.

Gratifying Job

The fact remains, however, that it is an altogther gratifying performance.

Homolka, who directed as well as acted the title role, gives a remarkably intuitive and relaxed impersonation of the central figure, and Miss Tetzel, in a much less rewarding part, still manages to be sufficiently earthy and exciting to satisfy those who see her merely as an attractive young lady.

Other highly satisfactory operations are delivered by Muriel Berkson, Art Smith, Gene Saks, Margaret Barker and Joseph Foley.

Let it be added that Boris Aronson has done as fine a job of designing as I've seen this season. His sets look like modern Norwegian architecture and, apparently, they're not unwieldy (that makes them wieldy, doesn't it?).

All of which brings us back to our premise—everybody isn't going to crave this show, but you won't see it better done in your time.